

Children's Books in Soviet Russia. From October Revolution 1917 to Perestroika 1986

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Summary in English

This book is a survey of the literature written in Russian for children and young people in the Soviet Union from 1918 up to the end of the 1980s. The first part follows the development of children's literature during the different decades, outlining the literary discussion of the time and presenting the main works of prose and poetry. In the second part, twelve important writers -- their lives and works -- are portrayed.

Historical survey

1. All the colours of the rainbow (1918 -- 28)

Only a few months after the October Revolution, the first demands were made that children's literature should be put in the service of the communist ideology. New publishing houses and journals had to be founded to replace the old bourgeois ones and a new body of writers was needed. In the first attempts to create a new children's literature, a significant role was played by Maksim Gorky. His call for a realistic literature, which should praise man and his potential ability to reshape the world with the help of his reason, was the embryo of the literary programme that the Communist Party was eventually to formulate. Gorky was also the main editor of the first Soviet children's journal.

The new economic policies that were temporarily introduced in 1921 gave writers, too, a breathing space. Private publishing houses were reintroduced. When Raduga (The Rainbow) published its first books in 1923, it marked the beginning of a decade that can be called the Golden Age of Soviet Russian children's literature. A large group of talented young Leningrad writers and artists gathered around Raduga, in the "Studio for Children's Literature" and the journal *Novy Robinson* (The New Robinson). The central name, both as poet and organizer, was Samuil Marshak. It was he who recruited the "oberiuty" for children's literature. Banished from literature for adults, these early absurdist found refuge in the section for children's literature of the state publishing house Gosizdat and in the outstanding journals *Youth* (Hedgehog) and *Chizh* (Siskin).

Through the founding of the October Children movement, the Pioneer movement and Komsomol, the Communist Party strengthened its hold on children's and youth culture. The organs of these organizations were to be *Murzilka* and *Pioner* (The Pioneer), the two oldest existing journals for children in the Soviet Union. A clearly stated desire to activate young readers in the creation

of a new socialist society was to be seen in these journals.

The greatest names in poetry were Korney Chukovsky and Samuil Marshak, two writers who in their turn became influential "teachers" for the "oberiuty", above all Daniil Kharms, Aleksandr Vvedensky and Yury Vladimirov. Fantasy, humour and a respect for distinctive characteristics of children were dominant traits in these writers, while Vladimir Mayakovsky represented the opposite pole, that is a didactic and ideologically oriented poetry.

In prose, works were published about the difficult life of Russian children before the revolution, about their role in the civil war and about the activities of the new political children's organizations. A social problem which was strongly reflected in the literature of the twenties and thirties was the crowds of wild, homeless children who roamed around in Russia (L. Panteleyev, Anton Makarenko). Description of nature found its master in Vitaly Bianki, while the literature of popular science was represented by M. Ilyin. Boris Zhitkov specialized in adventure stories, with the sea and foreign countries as their milieu. Fairy tales were written by Aleksandr Grin and Yury Olesha. The first professional writer of science fiction was Aleksandr Belyayev.

2. A new society -- a new literature (1929 -- 40)

The thirties were characterized by an ideological offensive. The struggle to create a genuine Soviet children's literature was now brought to fruition. In connection with this process, a violent debate started concerning the question whether fairy tales, or fantasy literature in general, could be accepted in a socialist society. An important role was again played by Maksim Gorky, who on his return to Russia after many years abroad, took over much of the organizational side of Soviet literature.

In 1932 the Union of Soviet Writers was formed and within it writers of children's literature had a section of their own. In the same year a professional journal *Detskaya literatura* (Children's Literature) was set up, followed a year later by a publishing house with the same name. At the first congress of the Union of Soviet Writers, where Marshak spoke about children's literature, socialist realism was made the obligatory method for all creative work. From the many conferences on children's literature that were arranged henceforth, it was easy to see that literature had now become a party matter. The main problem, often to be discussed but never to be solved, was how to unite ideological demands with acceptable literary quality. The purges of the thirties also had a detrimental impact on children's literature.

The main political and economic issues of the decade were reflected in both prose and poetry. Books were written about industrialization and the collectivization of farming, solidarity with the communist movement in other countries was underlined, children were taught military readiness. Biographical literature about the leaders of the revolutionary movement, above all Vladimir Lenin, was encouraged from above. The children were given their own hero in the form of Pavel Morozov, a Komsomol boy who was said to have sacrificed his life in the fight against the enemies of collectivization.

Samuil Marshak, Agniya Barto and several of the "oberiuty" adjusted themselves to the demands of the time. New names in poetry were Sergey Mikhalkov, Yelena Blaginina, Zinaida Aleksandrova and Lev Kvitko, all of them writers who wrote both political verses and lyrical poems about nursery play. The classic realistic works of prose of the thirties were written by Arkady Gaydar, Valentin Katayev, Venyamin Kaverin and Ruvim Frayerman. In the fields of fantasy and humorous literature, too, some enduring works were published. One thing which the novels of Aleksey Tolstoy, Lazar Lagin and Aleksandr Volkov had in common was that they were all in fact adaptations of foreign literature, a fact which reflects both the increasing isolation of children's literature in Soviet Russia and the claims that a new reader with a new taste had been born in the Soviet Union.

3. "Under the wise leadership of the Party and the fatherly care of comrade Stalin" (1941 -- 53)

The whole of Soviet society was affected by the Second World War. Many writers participated in the war as soldiers or as correspondents on the front, and among its victims Arkady Gaydar must be mentioned. Literature was expected to support the war effort and strengthen the optimism and will to victory of its readers. Writers depicted children and teenagers taking part in the fighting (Valentin Katayev, Aleksandr Fadeyev) or in the hard work at home.

The return to peace was darkened by an ideological campaign against Chukovsky and other "undesirable" writers. The decade after the war was to be the darkest in the history of Soviet Russian literature. The "Theory of Conflictlessness" and an endeavour to portray ideal characters put their stamp on children's literature. In the form of short stories and poems, many writers also contributed to the "Stalin Cult", the apotheosis of the leader of the country, Stalin.

The educating function of physical labour was stressed in books for young people (Aleksey Musatov, Susanna Georgiyevskaya, Nikolay Dubov). A popular genre was the school novel, in which the conflict was often between the class collective and an individualistically minded pupil (Valentina Oseyeva, Mariya Prilezhayeva). The cold war also left its mark on literature (N. Kalma). The most important writers of the decade were Lyubov Voronkova, Anatoly Rybakov and the humorists Nikolay Nosov and Yury Sotnik. Poetry was still above all serving topical purposes, as can be seen from the political verses of Sergey Mikhalkov.

4. Thaw in the children's world (1954 -- 68)

The death of Stalin in 1953 and the criticism of Stalinism at the XXth party congress in 1956 had a positive influence on children's literature. "The Thaw" brought forth a new generation of writers and enriched literature both thematically and stylistically.

The new poets (Boris Zakhoder, Valentin Berestov, Emma Moshkovskaya, Roman Sef, Irina Tokmakova and Genrikh Sapgir) gathered around the short-lived children's publishing house Detsky mir (The Children's World). They found their inspiration in folklore, children's rhymes and the works of the Russian avantgarde of the twenties.

Within prose there was a movement towards greater realism where both choice of subject and language were concerned. Writers like Nikolay Dubov wrote about the conflicts of teenagers in the family, at school and at work and subjects like orphanhood, divorce and juvenile crime were also treated. Interesting works were written within most sub-genres: psychological prose (Anatoly Aleksin, Yury Yakovlev, Rady Pogodin and Vadim Zheleznykov), adventure stories (Anatoly Rybakov), novels for girls (Lyubov Voronkova), humorous prose (Viktor Dragunsky, Viktor Golyavkin), fantasy and fairy tales (Yuri Druzhkov, Nikolay Nosov) and science fiction (Arkady and Boris Strugatsky). War prose, Lenin Cult (Zoya Voskresenskaya, Mariya Prilezhayeva) and political literature nevertheless retained their strong positions.

5. Years of stagnation (1969 -- 85)

Towards the end of the sixties a change of course again occurred in the cultural life of the Soviet Union. The freezing of the Thaw did not, however, assume such drastic forms in children's literature as it did in adult literature. Some of the optimism and vitality was lost. Within the body of writers hardly any renewal occurred, and the lack of new, talented writers and outstanding books was felt more and more keenly. Interest in poetry declined, and many poets devoted their efforts to summing up their writing. Names of interest in prose were Yury Korinets, Albert Likhanov, Vladimir Amlinsky and Vladislav Krapivin. Within the sub-genres of fantasy and humour, relatively few works of value appeared. Eduard Uspensky and Sergey Kozlov wrote fantasy and fairy tales, while the popular Kir Bulychev created science fiction for children.

6. Perestroika reaches children's literature (1986 --)

A new period began in the middle of the eighties, when Mikhail Gorbachov became leader of the party. The eighth writers' congress in 1986 offered the first test of how the slogans "perestroika" and "glasnost" were interpreted within literature. The status of children's and youth literature had declined, and it was demonstrated how the genre had also been neglected in economic terms. An all-union competition in 1987 for the best children's book confirmed the picture of a genre in crisis. There were no new names, topical issues were avoided. Calls for a greater realism in youth prose were again heard: this literature had to reflect the current moral crisis.

In a situation in which the ideological monopoly of the party has been broken and the socialist ideals obscured, the role and content of literature are once again being re-examined. The results of many decades' experience of ideological control and censorship in children's literature are depressing. Shifting political trends have had a decisive influence on the contents of books for children, while the dogma of socialist realism has impoverished their form. Talented writers have been hampered in their development, while ideologically 'sound' hacks have been allowed to dominate the field. Limited contact with foreign literature has added to the overall stagnation. The first sign of a new approach is a more liberal attitude towards religion. In the journal *Vesyolye kartinki* (Funny Pictures), Biblical tales for children

started to appear in 1989. A re-evaluation of the literary heritage has also begun. A keen interest in the hitherto almost completely neglected children's literature of pre-revolutionary days has awoken.

Portraits of twelve writers

The biggest name in Russian children's literature is *Korney Chukovsky* (1882 -- 1969). In the history of literature he has a place as a critic, essayist and translator, but it is his verse tales for children that have earned him the love of millions. Chukovsky's production in this field is not large and in the main it is concentrated to the twenties, but his influence is felt even today.

For more than forty years, *Samuil Marshak* (1887 -- 1964) was a leading name -- both as a writer and as an organizer -- in Soviet Russian children's literature. His large output clearly reflects the changing aesthetic and ideological ideals. In the twenties Marshak was part of the avantgarde, in the thirties, when socialist realism was made the literary norm, Marshak, with his poems about heroic deeds, Soviet patriotism and the transformation of the country, played an active part in guiding children's literature along new lines. It was not without reason, therefore, that Gorky called Marshak "the founder of Soviet children's literature".

Like Marshak, *Agnya Barto* (1906 -- 81) lived to see many of the main periods of Soviet literature. She herself showed an unchanging stability in her poetry for children. She was both the ideologically committed poet who wrote about current political and social questions, and the creator of lyrical portraits of children or scenes from the children's own world. If the former poems brought her many official rewards and a high position in Soviet cultural life, it is thanks to the latter that Barto gained a lasting place in children's literature.

Soviet Russian children's literature also has its martyrs, its persecuted geniuses. One of these was *Daniil Kharms* (1905 -- 42), a writer who only half a century after his death secured the place in literature that he rightly deserves. Spiritually he belonged to the literature of the twenties, with its stress on the humorous and experimental and its respect for the imagination of children. But he wrote at a time when other values prevailed, and for this he paid with his life. With his small prose pieces and poems, Kharms created an alternative to socialist realism, an alternative that in part could only be developed after the death of Stalin.

A unique position in the children's prose of the twenties and the thirties is held by *Boris Zhitkov* (1882 -- 1938). Wide experience of life and an impressive knowledge of the most diverse fields offered him inexhaustible material for his short stories and books of popular science. Zhitkov wrote about people at work, about different professions, and he praised traits like competence, courage and a sense of responsibility. An important source of inspiration was his love of the sea and of foreign, exotic places. Everything that Zhitkov wrote bore witness to a developed artistic taste.

The most important writer of books for young people in the thirties was *Arkady Gaydar* (1904 -- 41). Gaydar came to literature straight from the front, and his experiences of the civil war form the nucleus of his writing. There are many elements of adventure in Gaydar's stories, but they never occur at the expense of the

ideological aspects. The bonds between the world of children and the norms of Soviet society are stressed and Gaydar's clearly stated goal is to turn the readers into patriotic and vigilant Soviet citizens.

In his novels and short stories, *Lev Kassil* (1905 -- 70), wrote about contemporary Soviet life, about teenagers and their world, about school, sports, cultural life and the war. He often used the "development novel" to describe how, with the help of older confidants, young people could, in spite of their mistakes, reach a mature view of life. Traits of character dear to Kassil are modesty, unselfishness, endurance and courage. His own development stretched from a book that some critics found nihilistic to straightforward socialistic realism.

Nikolay Nosov (1908 -- 76) is the author of a number of humorous short stories about children, a school novel, plus a trilogy of fairy tale novels about some small creatures and their world. In an attempt to explain Nosov's popularity among children, the critic Stanislav Rassadin wrote in 1961: "In every literature there are 'happy talents'. Such a talent in our literature is Nikolay Nosov. But his uniqueness and attractiveness lie not only in his humour, but also in an exceptional ability to penetrate into the soul of the child, in astonishing mutual understanding with the young reader."

Among modern writers of youth prose, *Anatoly Aleksin* (b. 1924) was a leading name in the fifties and sixties. In his novels, short stories and plays he wrote mostly about the meeting between the world of Soviet teenagers and the world of adults. He depicted everyday life with a stress on moral questions and the formation of character in young people. If humour dominated his early books, Aleksin later turned to more serious, psychological prose.

In the seventies the internationally best known Soviet children's writer was *Yury Korinets* (1923 -- 89). His main theme was the history of the Soviet Union, as seen through the eyes of a boy. The name of the hero and his age might differ, but it was always the writer's own life experiences that formed the basis for his books. Love for the revolution and nature were prominent features of his work.

The most famous Russian fairy tale figure of recent decades is Cheburashka, a small, exotic furry animal unknown to zoologists. Its creator is *Eduard Uspensky* (b. 1937), the writer of several humorous children's books. The characters in his books vary from lively young boys and girls to witches and wizards, from dogs who love to roam the woods with camera at the ready to radio mechanics, small as mice. What the books have in common is a humour which borders on the absurd and a playful disrespect for conventions and expectations.

The long list of children's books by *Yury Koval* (b. 1938) includes poetry, detective stories and stories about animals. Koval's most important genre, however, has been descriptions of nature, lyrical scenes from the Russian countryside.